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WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR

By

T. K. DORAISWAMY

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Mr. Doraiswamy (born 1922) lives and teaches at Trivandrum. Writes in Tamil and English with equal facility and an equable fastidiousness. Some of his poems in both media have been published in magazines. Has an austere view of his art which he says transforms frustration into fulfilment.

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A NOTE

"WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR" is my first publication in English.

I regard these pieces as tentative efforts towards a definition of poetry as I conceive it; and I hold that all forms of literature tend towards a *style of thinking* peculiar to the individual writer.

The poems in the series "SONGS IN REVERSE" espouse a view of life which comes naturally to one who has a taste for the classics in Tamil; it is basically Indian. This applies to all the poems in the anthology. The four poems pertaining to "WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR" and "A SIREN IN REVERSE" deal with the relations between the sexes in our transitional society. They are not poems on frustrated love! Translations and other pieces in the collection serve to make the point that while it is possible to add a Tamil flavour to English, it is also essential to preserve the characteristic note of a language as such — in this case English.

All the poems are written in free verse. While writing them I had in mind Pound's observation that verse should be written in "the sequence of the rhythmic

phrase" and Lawrence's dictum that content itself dictates the form.

Eight poems in the anthology were published in *Thought*: The poem on Gandhi was published in the *Orient Review and Literary Digest*. I take this opportunity to thank the editors of these magazines for the kind encouragement given to me by them.

Before I conclude, I must express my gratitude to Prof. P. Mahadevan for all the invaluable help and advice he has given me in bringing out this volume.

Trivandrum
14-4-'63 T. K. DORAISWAMY.

INTRODUCTION

To write poetry or—more correctly—to compose it, has ever been an act of faith. Our ancient seers have said that it is the fruit of *tapas*, and each practitioner has to discover it for himself in terms of his utmost capabilities—negative and positive. This is a process which consists in breaking and making tradition to sustain the current of creative thought in a live circuit, exactly as we do with electric energy from generation to distribution. Being in its essence perennial, it is inept to label it in part or whole 'modern' or 'ancient'. It is an emotive approach to the problem of how we should come to terms with the enduring Reality.

In these few poems of my friend Mr. Doraiswamy, the reader cannot be at a loss to find a central point of reference, of relevance to all of us. He who is in a hurry may find something to titillate him here ; but beneath the surface there is a core of intertwined thought and feeling which bears directly on life. He has caught the academic flavour without a trace of pedantry, and has worked up an individual pattern which is free from *cliches*. He transmits and transmutes significant echoes (*dhvani*) from elder poets in an idiom which is his own. He is above all

keenly conscious of the tragic predicament of the individual at war with himself and his environment, and has brought it out in the two longest poems here. Quantitatively this volume is very slight ; but its quality is full of promise. For here is a blend of many familiar simples distilled into a new essence.

P. MAHADEVAN.

TRIBUTE TO GANDHI

(Sotto Voce)

Your stricture to Tagore
On the functions of art,
Your views on education,
Notwithstanding ;

Despite
Your stripped ideals
Of sex,
Of literature,
Of Life ;

Thou wast an up-thrust
Of the Indian genius.

Not thy Inner Voice
Misled,
Not that thy Ahimsa
Was anything other than
A weapon of the pure in mind ;

Things
Prevailed,
Not in Thy reckoning.

That the Inner Voice
Is very often
The Voice of convenience,
Of expediency
And evasion,
We know.

In the hands of
The weak,
The Perverted,
And The Diabolical
Ahimsa spawns
Numberless evils
— That also we know.

(That Thou had no
Use for such knowledge
Was part of thy greatness.)
Thou hadst
Thy collection of songs,
Idioms of the heart,
Ways of communication
We know

Through God
Thou worked and won the people ;
And not
That Thou sank
To the sub-human level
When speaking to the human herd,
As the unknown Indian
Averred.

Essentially
Indian,
Oddly enough
Thou hadst something
Of the Anglo-Saxon too.

Thou
Too was Time-bitten
To endeavour and activity.
Thou too
Was deliberate and unhurried
Like any of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Thou hadst
Thy short-comings
Only too well-known.

You never used
The scripture
To make a point;
Or to see the
Mind
Disporting itself.

In the quixotry of
Your great ideals,
In your ignorance
Of fear,
And absolute
Unchanging values,
From the start,

Through the times of skill
And suffering,
To your ultimate
Martyrdom,
You speak
To the dark
Ethical underside
Of Humanity.

You live.

SONG IN REVERSE (1)

Fingers are ten
Little, long and middling ;
Eyes are two
Black, blue, or brown ;
The navel
Is a shallow dip.
But where is the pit of perdition ?
Funnel of a nose,
Lips of a mouth,
And the ears sucking sound ;
Skin
A running expanse of sensitivity
And hair and nails ;
Maggot of a brain
Thinking and dreaming ;
And the
Spendthrift of a heart ;
Song and stutter,
Stink and smell ;
Once alive
And once dead,
Whose is the profit
And whose is the loss ?

SONG IN REVERSE (2)

Bits of paper
And a tearful sky ;
Acres of blue
And a Shroud
Ever so sweet ;
Nipples of a bitch,
Delivered of its puppy-load,
Like buttons in a row ;
The tangled skein
Which other men
Call Life
Which they
Like
To weave and unweave
With a fierce
Delight.

SONG IN REVERSE (VI)

Yet another day breaks
Of circular unawareness;
The sickly psyche blooms again
Which the eyes ignore
And the heart rejects;
The slow unmoving tide of blood
Moves with a backward wash
And a sideward spill;
Split by the blind light
The eyes droop;
And hit by the lash of the daily noise
The ears shrivel;
And irked by the inert hours
The type-writer of a brain
Taps out little meaning and less sense.
Thus fleers
A world of mere events
Worked by the unwilled ego.

SONG IN REVERSE (T)

The madcap by the river-side
Sat still and in a tone of ecstasy
Sang

"I worship
An idol of stone
In a temple of rock
With petals soft
Of flowers sweet ;

I come
With sandal paste
And incense smoke
And saffron dust ;

A jug of water pure
I bring,
For the holy lips
To taste and to bless ;

And here come
Devout hearts
And lying lips ;
And sad spirits guilt-laden
And murderous eyes
Dreaming of revenge sweet ;

Come too
Youth with the aura of sex
And dreams romantic which will
Die anon ;

Round about the temple walls
You will see
With eyes that turn with disgust
Sickness of flesh
And vice of spirit
Which will look strange
In the glare of the noon-day sun ;

But this stone
Is a symbol of Power
And this crowd
Is not wholly bad ;

The idol of stone
Will reverse human weakness
To an eerie pattern of strength
To will into form the yet
Inconceivable purpose,
Which will grant each human heart its secret wish
In a form different to further the end Divine."

WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR (1)

Flesh and bone
Deck her
With bridal charm.

The geometry of her mind
And the iron curve of her will
Lend a secret strength
To her quiet face.

And
Down the road of Desire
To enter the Room of her life
I have not been able
So far,
So long.

The Ocean of my Desire
Cannot lip in
The shore of her firm will
Somehow
Till now.

WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR (2)

Thin, brown and tall,
(Like the myna in the garden
With its pair of yellow-ringed eyes)
You are a vision of loveliness still.

In green and white, you pass by
Like a bar of sunshine
On a patch of flowers bright.

In amber and brown you gleam
Like a virile fish that darts
On the glittering surface of the moving stream.

A single rose rides on your dark hair
Like the secret passion that glows
In my fervent soul for love of you.

In yellow and black you flit
Like a lovely butterfly that comes
In a world of sunshine and flowers.

Your curved slippers, velvet dark
And gleaming bright like tongues of fire
Bespeak your cruel smile full of scorn
For this still devout heart.

In faded white and brown I wait
Like the victims of Love
Killed at the Altar of Pride.

WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR (3)

Lady,
"We receive but what we give."

Yet,
"You expect to receive
When
For us,
Not to give
Is the way to live"
You seem to say.

Lady,
True to you,
But not for the heart
That pines for you.

(Yet
When no land is in sight
Who will double the Cape of Good Hope
To reach the sea of Despair ?)

Lady,
Should what divides
Have the final say,
To decide what should unite ?

Mere things
That count
Like Power and Wealth
In the busy market
Where we buy and sell,
Are left behind
When Love wins in the race.

Sweet Lady,
In the Earth you live
Even in the upper regions
Where you thrive
No mortal signs,
For the Eternal Wait.

Beauty will not brave the weather of change
And Time will crinkle the flesh into spidery webs.
And Desire will eat the flesh
As does the worm the flower.

Lady,
Joy sings,
With
Other lips.

Lady,
In the light of the sun
What is human love
But the desire
Of the cock for the hen.

Come Lady,
Step down
To meet and mix
Like any wise son of flesh.

Come
With a flutter of wings
To lose yourself
In a cloud of feathers
Like the cock over the hen.

Know Lady,
When the senses catch fire
All differences of rank and degree
Do soon expire.

WORDS TO THE LISTENING AIR (4)

Eyes only look ;
When lips quiver into buds
Not to bloom into speech,
Ears vainly eavesdrop.

Will the moving clouds
Overhead,
Break into tears
When a mortal dies ?

Only a sudden spurt of rain
Dies at a whiff of dust
This hot Summer noon.

I loved her
And she me.

This day yester year
On a hot summer noon,
She died as she lived,
Unwed.

Now too
The clocks tick
And the drums beat.

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GANAPATHI, THE ELEPHANT GOD

This God who sounds like a bumble-bee
And looks like a temple of fun,
This first-born of a lunatic lout,
Who rides on a rat,
And put a girdle round the world
In the twinkling of an eye,
Warms the cockles of the heart !
He spells the superscript omega
Which cancels all impedimenta !
This benign uncle
Of gargoyles and caricatures,
A lover of common sense
And dreamer of fair women,
Awaits a mate like his mother,
Like the lady of the far south
With her endless vigil
For her paramour from across the seas.

THE RAIN

"The rain, it raineth every day";
From high heaven
Through ambient space
Down to the enveloping Earth
It comes,
With a murmuring breath
And a mounting roar
Deleted
By a deep moan and a dying fall.

"The rain, it raineth every day.";
Silver needles or gentle kisses,
It too suits the muse's whim;
And to a keen poetic brain
Lit up by the pure Freudian gleam,
The Rain is the Lover
And the Earth a willing Bride.

When Heaven's ardour breaks
The hot Earth rushes to meet
A frantic lover,
Goaded by the Season's fury;
And the falling Rain
Rings and rings
Of the pour and the surge,
Of the up and the down,
Of the crisis past and the climax reached.

And the green sap of the universe
Leaps through a world grown quiet
Still and ripe, rich and dark.

A SONG

I

Claims of flesh
Keep us kin ;

We answer to our names ;

Our work we do
To earn our right to live ;

Yet
All this is not true
As your name is not you ;

In the spirit of our especial skill we live
As in the arms of the Beloved we count the moments
of ecstasy.

A SONG

II

The Drip-Drip of the falling Rain
Drives me to dream
Of the whirr of the poet's brooding brain
As it runs to shed
Riches undreamt ;

And a chaos of birds in the morning sky
Heralds the Dawn of the Bridal day ;
And Fancy whispers soft
That we sleep to wake
To weave the endless miracle of Make-Believe.

CONCEITS

A snail
Am I ;

When
Things tempt

Back
Into my shell
I shrink ;

Desire stands
Erect
Like a tower
Or
Lies
Still
Like water in a well ;

Over the face of the deep
A gentle breeze doth pass ;

Now things quicken . . . .

THE FINAL DOT

"Life contracts and death is expected. . . ."

—Wallace Stevens.

Not yet.
Break of Day;
Still,
Day or Night,
Light peters out;
The Light of Fire
Lapses into Smoke;
Day dies into Night;
The room cracks;
The tongue dries;
The ears are deaf to human sound;
A feeble wind
Dies on the door-step;
Over the border leaps
The Alien Gleam;
Out of the nostrils
Spools
A thread of air
With no fleck of smell;
The mind gropes;
For the hands and the legs
Require much searching
For placing;
The penis wilts,

A piece of black uninviting chalk ;
Air breathes over the face ;
The thirst of the heart ;
The need for assurance ;
Gust of a passing fear ;
The room recedes ;
Something moves on the skin ;
Light brush of a moth's wing,
Or hard touch of a horse's hoof ?
The brain has left,
Locking the door ;
Things are asleep
Choked by a vacuum sphere ;
The heart is a still sticker ;
And still gutters
The growing plexus of failing light ;
The silent mouth
Opens and slowly shuts,
Hand of a broken clock,
At intervals working ;
The blind Eyes of Darkness
Stray in and out ;
The walls break ;
The feel of the exterior world,
Travel bent ;
Somebody passes by,
Male or Female,
Stranger or Familiar,
Hard to know ;
Human,
Yet a shadow on the wall ;
(Having come, stay.)

The peep of the Night Sky ;
The forces that won't let go ;
The Urge and the Desire ;
Things flow ;
Eyes slow down ;
The air is human thick ;
The red eye of the sinking wick ;
And Now.

The Room is not here ;

The world is NOWHERE.

THE TAMIL WRITERS

[*A part of* "SONG IN REVERSE (AW)"]

My days I spend
In the company of writers
I know,
Native and foreign;
Their works but a bowl of spittle
If the truth were told!

And I know
The Tamil Writers
Like the fingers of my hand
The very shape of my soul;

Listen,
While I count their names
And chronicle their ways;

"Satyan" said
When I met him first

"Write;
Nothing else will please us as much;
Fill the pages of your note-book
And Posterity will wait at your door."

And what is Satyan now?
"An aged eagle among hooded owls"
I quote.

And Chellappa spoke
"We are the master-craftsmen,
In the end,
The public will take
What we give."
"Communicate, my foot... !
To ourselves we communicate
When we write
To discover to ourselves
The gift of our sight
And the craft of our art."

And what is Chellappa now ?
An editor of a critical miscellany
And a voice of Dissent
To a world of tawdry cheapness
Which flaunts the prizes of the academe.

And "Bikshu"
With a twinkle of his eyes
Betrays the secret of his art

"By the road-side I sit
And watch the world as it goes
To net it in my art
Ere it knows it is caught."

And what is Bikshu now ?
A beloved figure
In the inner circle of choice spirits
Biding his time to enter the Hall of Fame.

And here is
La. Sa. Ra. lashing out
" In fever-heat
I work
To catch the scent of the rose ere it is fled,
To capture the glow of experience ere it dies;
The human form Divine
Still eludes; but my pursuit
Will never cease."

And what is La. Sa. Ra. now?
An artist,
Doing his work
In the way of his knowing;
An admiring public pelts him
With roses
The thorns of which sometimes hurt;

And here
We meet K. Azhakiriswamy
Who will quietly tell you
" The secret of subtle laughter
Will light up the dark
Caverns of human consciousness
If only you know."

And what is he now?
Popular? Yes.
Prized for his art? No.
But he has
Only a lover's quarrel
With the world
In the language of Frost.

And this
Is R. Shanmugasundaram

" In a brief compass
He can create a world
The depth and subtlety of which
Tease us out of thought."

And what is he now ?
Yet another writer
Declared unfit
By the Mandarins
Come to judge their betters.

Friend,
Forget not
To meet T. Janakiraman
" Woman is the final secret of Man
And sometimes she will trip him up."

Does he say this ?
Or is it only my fancy
Which deceives ?
Believe me when I say
We like him
As he
Knows the craft of his art
Like the back of his hand ;

And we
Should meet "Mauni" last;
Hear him speak
"Come with me
For a walk
In the interior of the mind;
You are free to leave
If you can."

And what is "Mauni" now?

A stone idol in a temple dark
In the eyes of the uninitiated.

So
The world of Tamil Letters Wags,
A vital spirit,
Which neither the unmeaning praise
Nor the uncritical acceptance
Of the fourth-rate fiction-weaving horde
By the vast millions of the quarter-educated
Will put out.

"Satyan": Pseudonym of KA. NAA. Subramanyam.
"Bikshu": Pseudonym of NA. Pichamurthy.
LA. SA. RA.: Initials of LA. SA. Ramamirtham.

A SIREN IN REVERSE

Draupathi is she,
And I am Arjun,
Desiring and fleeing her presence ;

Time was
When
With bow bent
And arrow fixed
He hit the target
And thus his valour proved,
Fought for and won his
Beloved.

But
I, that desire her
Flee her presence

With my endless chatter
And ceaseless speculations

" On-That-Which-Is-And-Is-Not,
And the Is-ness of -the-Whatness "
With no purpose fixed,
And valour lacking
And my very sex its nature changing

I

Charmed by her presence,
Yet courage lacking
Athirst this lack to fill,
I, that desire her,
Flee her presence;

Draupathi is she
Graceful and austere,
Skilful and gracious;
She walks in beauty
Steeped in learning
And yet a traveller
Most wise,
In her passage through the world.

And does she
Such a vestal as she,
Know the worm that gnaws Arjun's heart?

In the backward abysm of Time
In the field of battle,
The sight of the embattled hosts,
His Kinsmen turned foes,
Unnerved him,
Him of matchless strength;

And earlier before
When Fate Willed
He bent low
And undemurring, accepted
The annulment of his manhood and identity.

But then,
With His strong arm assisting
And his innate valour leaping forth,
He trod the Earth, a proud man and bold.

Draupathi is she
The Well of chastity undefiled ;
The still centre
Untouched by the eddying world around.
Male and erotic mad ;

To me
Weakened by Desire,
Yet fleeing her presence,
In silence she speaks,
" After the battle is ended,
With strength gained and purpose-girt
Come here and claim
What is yours."

Thus with her sweet smile
And armour of chastity pure
Stands she, a siren in reverse.
And I am Arjun
That desires and flees her presence.

(An English version of the author's poem in Tamil, "*Kollippāvai*").

A BOWL OF SPITTLE

(An English version of the poem in Tamil by the author)

These alien birds, these slow-moving clouds, and the dust under this travelling foot ;

A plug of tobacco, a ride on Pegasus, and the memory of your dear face ;

The Proustian probe and curve of "Mauni's" style that evokes the picture of the crawling snail with its hard shell and sensitive horns ; the novels of KA. NAA. SU., reminiscent of the hard and bright clarity of the Monday-morning world, and the questing critical spirit of Chellappa that calls to mind the never-resting rooster that digs the earth with its claws and worries the rubbish-heap with its sharp beak to fork out a single grain of real corn ;

The anguish of Desire, the broken flights of Fancy, the spirit of Melancholy that comes out of a blue sky, the glowing embers of the fast fading spirit of creation, the chambers of the Past, and the special route I have chosen to travel by —

These are the thoughts that crowd thick and fast
into my brooding spirit,

As I find myself curled in my "basketchair"
near the open casement of my chamber;

And outside, I could sense the steady and steadfast
gaze of the wide blue sky,

And here in my chamber, right to the left of my
"basketchair", the still vision of a bowl of
spittle, filled to the brim, like a cistern of
spat-out scarlet blood, invades my consciousness.

"MAUNI": Author of a single collection of short stories in Tamil entitled "AZHIAH CHUDAR" (The Undying Light), noted for their portrayal of the subtle workings of the psyche.

KAA. NA. SU.: Author of half-a-dozen novels in Tamil, which reveal a world of vision and value, which is uniquely his.

C. S. Chellappa: Editor of a critical miscellany in Tamil entitled "EZHUTTHU" and author of a couple of collections of short stories and a fine novel entitled "Jeevanamsam".

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BEYOND

Here the muffled music of the funeral note,
Here the merry peal of the marriage bell ;
Here the bride, gay with flowers on her hair,
Engaged in dalliance sweet,
With her dear one near her ;
Here the maid, with grief-dimmed eyes,
Forever parted from her mate.
So fares the world,
On an ambivalent note,
Created by a non-caring God :
Trouble-creating indeed is
This sphere of ours ;
And so knowing it so well,
Seek thou
That-Which-Is-Trouble-Free
The isles of bliss.

(A free rendering of Poem No. 194 from the Tamil Anthology "*Puranānūru*").

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